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Edna St. Vincent Millay



Youth and Wings *Edna St. Vincent Millay: Singer* *By Carl Van Doren*

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Youth and Wings

Edna St. Vincent Millay: Singer

By ^{Dr.}Carl Van Doren

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THE little renaissance of poetry which there have been a hundred historians to scent and chronicle in the United States during the last decade, flushed to a dawn in 1912. In that year was founded a magazine for the sole purpose of helping poems into the world; in that year was published an anthology which meant to become an annual, though, as it happened, another annual by another editor took its place the year following. The real poetical event of 1912, however, was the appearance in *The Lyric Year*, tentative anthology, of the first outstanding poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Who that then had any taste of which he can now be proud but remembers the discovery, among the numerous failures and very innumerable successes which made up the volume, of *Renascence*, by a girl of twenty whose name none but her friends and a lucky critic or two had heard? After wading through tens and dozens of rhetorical strophes and moral stanzas, it was like suddenly finding wings to come upon these lines:

"All I could see from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood;
I turned and looked another way,
And saw three islands in a bay.
So with my eyes I traced the line
Of the horizon, thin and fine,
Straight around till I was come
Back to where I'd started from;
And all I saw from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood."

The diction was so plain, the arrangement so obvious, that the magic of the opening seemed a mystery; and yet the lift and turn of these verses were magical, as if a lark had taken to the air out of a dreary patch of stubble.

Nor did the poem falter as it went on. If it had the movement of a bird's flight, so had it the ease of a bird's song. The poet of this lucid voice had gone through a radiant experience. She had,

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she said with mystical directness, felt that she could touch the horizon, and found that she could touch the sky. Then infinity had settled down upon her till she could hear

“The ticking of Eternity.”

The universe pressed close and crushed her, oppressing her with omniscience and omnisentience; all sin, all remorse, all suffering, all punishment, all pity poured into her, torturing her. The weight drove her into the cool earth, where she lay buried, but happy, under the falling rain. Suddenly came over her the terrible memory of the “multi-colored, multiform, beloved” beauty she had lost by this comfortable death. She burst into a prayer so potent that the responding rain, gathering in a black wave, opened the earth above her and set her free. Whereupon, somewhat quaintly, she moralized her experience with the pride of youth finally arrived at full stature in the world.

Renascence, one of the loveliest of American poems, was an adventure, not an allegory, but it sounds almost allegorical because of the way it interpreted and distilled the temper which, after a long drought, was coming into American verse. Youth was discovering a new world, or thought it was. It had taken upon itself burdens of speculation, of responsibility, and had sunk under the weight. Now, on fire with beauty, it returned to joy and song.

Other things than joy and song, however, cut across the track of this little renaissance. There was a war. Youth—at least that part of it which makes poems—went out to fight, first with passion for the cause and then with contempt for the dotards who had botched and bungled. Gray Tyrtaeuses might drone that here was a good war designed to end war, but youth meantime saw that it was dying in hordes and tried to snatch what ecstasy it could before the time should come when there would be no more ecstasy. Boys and girls who would otherwise have followed the smooth paths of their elders now questioned them and turned aside into different paths of life. Young men and maidens who would otherwise have expected little of love for years to come now demanded all that love offers, and demanded it immediately for fear it might come too late. The planet was reeling, or looked to be; all the

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settled orders were straining and breaking. Amid the hurly-burly of argument and challenge and recrimination a lyric had a good chance to be unheard; yet it was a lyrical hour, as it always is when the poet sees himself surrounded by swift moments hurrying to an end. Some sense of this in the air, even amid the hurly-burly, gave to the youth of the time that rash, impatient, wild ardor and insolence and cynicism which followed in such fleet succession, growing sharper as the war which was to have been good turned into the peace which was bound to be bad.

Miss Millay's *Aria da Capo*, like *Renascenck*, has an allegorical sound, because it lays its finger so surely upon the mad sickness of the race during those futile years. The little play, now dainty with artifice and now racy with slang and satire, opens with Columbine and Pierrot skylarking in their pretty fashion, using, however, words with two sharp edges to each of them. But they are driven from the stage by tragedy, which sets the friendly shepherds Thyrsis and Corydon to playing a scene in which they divide their mimic field with colored ribbons, which they call a wall, find one of them mimic water on his side and the other mimic jewels, move on to a conflict which they did not mean or want and which they see is hardly so much reality as senseless acting, and in the end kill each other across the barrier, dying in each other's arms. Back come Pierrot and Columbine to resume, only a little disturbed by the dead bodies lying under their feet, the happy farce. Love among the ruins! Butterflies above the battle! Such folly as had been acted by the nations, the play hints, belongs rather to the painted theater than to the solid earth. There is not enough wisdom to understand it; there was not enough tears to bewail it. It may be better to frolic and forget.

The decade since the little renaissance began has created a kind of symbol for this irresponsible mood in the more or less mythical Greenwich Village, where, according to the popular legend, art and mirth flourish without a care, far from the stupid duties of human life. No one so well as Miss Millay has spoken with the accents credited to the village.

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"My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!"

Thus she commences in *A Few Figs from Thistles*. And she continues with impish songs and rakish ballads and sonnets which laugh at the love which throbs through them. Suckling was not more insouciant than she is in *Thursday*:

"And if I loved you Wednesday,
Well, what is that to you?
I do not love you Thursday—
So much is true.

And why you come complaining
Is more than I can see.
I loved you Wednesday—yes—but what
Is that to me?"

This tincture of diablerie appears again and again in Miss Millay's verse, perhaps most of all in the candor with which she talks of love. She has put by the mask under which other poets who were women, apparently afraid for the reputation of their sex, have spoken as if they were men. She has put by the posture of fidelity which women in poetry have been expected to assume. She speaks with the voice of women who, like men, are thrilled by the beauty of their lovers and are stung by desire; who know, however, that love does not always vibrate at its first high pitch, and so, too faithful to love to insist upon clinging to what has become half-love merely, let go without desperation. A woman may be fickle for fun, Miss Millay suggests in various poems wherein this or that girl teases her lover with the threat to leave him or the claim that she has forgotten him; but so may a woman show wisdom by admitting the variability and transience of love.

What sets Miss Millay's love-poems apart from almost all those written in English by women is the full pulse which, in spite of their gay impudence, beats through them. She does not speak in the name of forlorn maidens or of wives bereft, but in the name of women who dare to take love at the flood, if it offers, and who later, if it has passed, remember with exultation that they had what

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no coward could have had. Conscience does not trouble them, nor any serious division in their natures. No one of them weeps because she has been a wanton, no one of them because she has been betrayed. Rarely since Sappho has a woman written as bravely as this.

"What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts to-night, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply;
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry."

In passages like these Miss Millay has given body and vesture to a sense of equality in love; to the demand by women that they be allowed to enter the world of adventure and experiment in love which men have long inhabited. But Miss Millay does not, like any feminist, argue for that equality. She takes it for granted, exhibits it in action, and turns it into beauty.

Beauty, not argument, is, after all, Miss Millay's concern and goal. For the most part, she stands with those who love life and persons too wholly to spend much passion upon anything abstract. She loves the special countenance of every season, the hot light of the sun, gardens of flowers with old, fragrant names, the salt smell of the sea along her native Maine coast, the sound of sheep-bells and dripping eves and the unheard sound of city trees, the homely facts of houses in which men and women live, tales of quick deeds and eager heroisms, the cool, kind love of young girls for one another, the color of words, the beat of rhythm. The shining clarity of her style does not permit her to work the things she finds beautiful into tapestried verse; she will not ask a song to carry more than it can carry on the easiest wings; but in all her graver songs and sonnets she serves beauty in one way or another. Now she affirms her absolute loyalty to beauty; now she hunts it out in unexpected places; most frequently of all she buries it with some of the most exquisite dirges of her time.

These returning dirges and elegies and epitaphs are as much the natural speech of Miss Millay as is her insolence of joy in the

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visible and tangible world. Like all those who most love life and beauty, she understands that both are brief and mortal. They take her round and round in a passionate circle: because she loves them so ardently she knows they cannot last, and because she knows they cannot last she loves them the more ardently while they do. Dispositions such as hers give themselves to joy when their vitality is at its peak; in their lower hours they weep over the graves of loveliness which are bound to crowd their courses. Having a high heart and a proud creed, Miss Millay leaves unwept some graves which other poets and most people water abundantly, but she is stabbed by the essential tragedy and pity of death. Thus she expresses the tragic powerlessness of those who live to hold those who die:

“Nor shall my love avail you in your hour.
In spite of all my love, you will arise
Upon that day and wander down the air
Obscurely as the unattended flower,
It mattering not how beautiful you were,
Or how beloved above all else that dies.”

Thus she expresses the pitiful knowledge which the living have that they cannot help the dead:

“Be to her, Persephone,
All the things I might not be;
Take her head upon your knee.
She that was so proud and wild,
Flippant, arrogant and free,
She that had no need of me,
Is a little lonely child
Lost in Hell,—Persephone,
Take her head upon your knee;
Say to her, ‘My dear, my dear,
It is not so dreadful here.’ ”

Are these only the accents of a minor poet, crying over withered roses and melted snows? Very rarely do minor poets strike such moving chords upon such universal strings. Still more rarely do merely minor poets have so much power over tragedy and pity, and yet in other hours have equal power over fire and laughter.



The Poetry and Plays of Edna St. Vincent Millay



The Harp Weaver and Other Poems

The title poem of this volume was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1922. John Weaver of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* calls it "far and away the finest book of poems of 1923—yes, and of many other years too." There is a mingling of Shakespeareanism and of her own individual lyricism which makes these poems fluid, rippling, beautiful."

\$2.00

A Few Figs from Thistles

One of her earlier and best loved volumes. "Weir Vernon in the *New York Tribune* says of her: "Everything she writes is invested with an early-morning surprise. She has a wayward, faery quality, and, more than any other American poet, a certain kind of magnificence."

\$1.50

The Lamp and the Bell

"Miss Millay has succeeded where so many writers have failed. She has written a Shakespearean play that is fresh and vigorous, with a humor that is her own and lines that are memorable in her own fashion." *The Literary Review*.

\$1.50

Aria Da Capo

A PLAY IN ONE ACT, WITH THE AUTHOR'S
SUGGESTIONS FOR ITS PRODUCTION

At the time of its production by the Provincetown Players, Alexander Woolcott, in an enthusiastic review in the *New York Times*, said of it: "This bitterly ironic little fantasy is the most beautiful and interesting play in the English language now to be seen in New York."

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